

For a Sustainable Socialist Architecture

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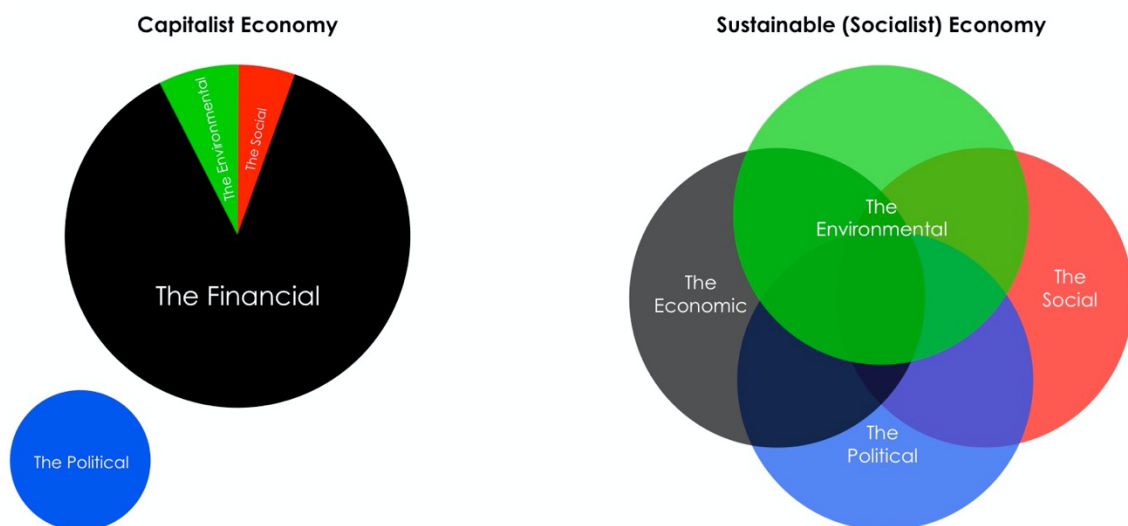
Architects for Social Housing, London, UK

The crisis of housing affordability in the UK is at its most severe in the capital, London, but its effects are the result of global forces whose financial roots reach deep into the world economy. These include the marketisation, privatisation and financialisation of housing provision; the neo-liberalisation of the processes of property development; and the writing of legislation and policy designed to accommodate and promote the financial interests of investors and developers above the housing needs of resident populations. We have all experienced something of the effects of this crisis, which has resulted in the systemic destruction of urban and largely working-class communities and cultures for short-term financial gain and at the cost of increasing social and economic inequality and environmental degradation.

It is within this global context that the challenge of sustainable cities — or, more accurately, the question of how we can develop sustainably — has become one of the most urgent issues of our time, in which architects and built-environment professionals have the opportunity and duty to take a decisive role. The relatively recent rise in public awareness about the need for environmental sustainability is overdue and welcome; however, sustainable development that meets social need must go beyond the simplistic notions of the environment that characterise so-called 'green architecture'. If it is to be truly sustainable, architecture must not only contribute to countering the negative effects of development on the environment, but it must, in addition, be socially beneficial and economically viable for its users and inhabitants, and therefore, also, politically progressive. To be sustainable, in other words, architecture must be socialist.

Architects for Social Housing

When we founded Architects for Social Housing (ASH) in 2015, we were not responding to the theoretical question of urban sustainability, but to the immediate and practical realities of the ongoing demolition and privatisation of the remaining social housing in London. In particular, we wanted to oppose the negative social, economic and environmental consequences this was having for the existing housing communities, as well as the wider, long-term and more structural effects the loss of such housing was and is creating.



Architects for Social Housing, Opposed economies of architecture

The diagram above was created during ASH's residency in Vancouver last summer, where we delivered a series of lectures under the title 'For a Socialist Architecture'.¹ Through this diagram we tried to show opposed economies of architecture. Under capitalism, the economy is equated purely with the financial sphere, which apportions resources to the social and environmental aspects of production solely in these terms (as, for

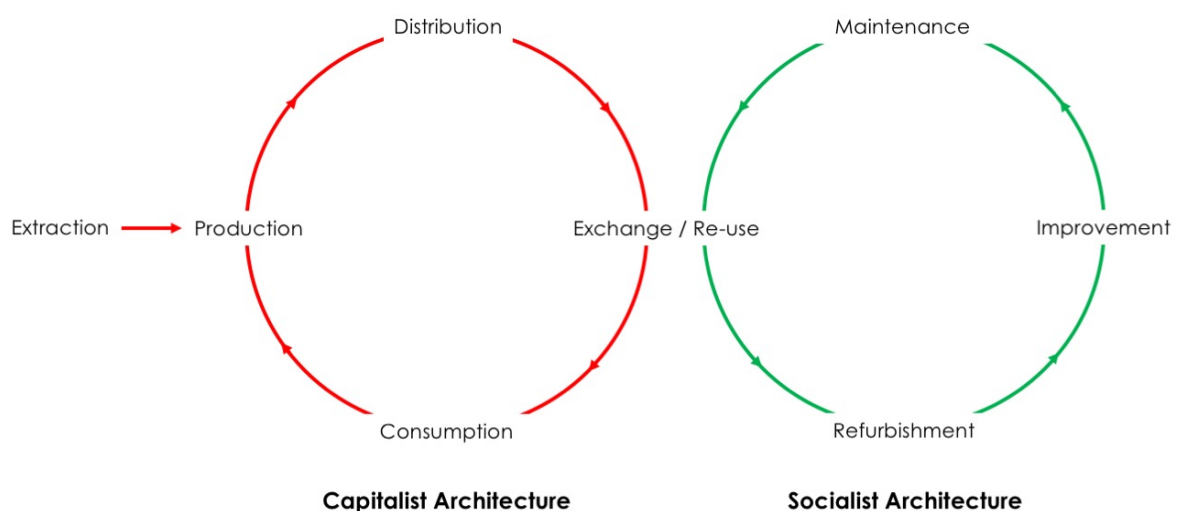
1. See Architects for Social Housing. For a Socialist Architecture: Lectures at 221A, Vancouver. December 2019. <https://architectsforsocialhousing.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/For-a-Socialist-Architecture.pdf>

example, percentages of a project budget for so-called 'affordable housing' or 'green architecture'), with the political sphere situated beyond the totality of social relations as an unchangeable given. Under socialism, by contrast, architecture must engage simultaneously with all the constituent spheres of practice — the social, the environmental, the economic and the political — in order to be sustainable. A multi-million-pound residential development with green roofs and 5 per cent affordable housing built on the ruins of a demolished social housing estate evicted of its working-class community currently meets a capitalist notion of sustainable architecture; it does not meet a socialist one.

Our definition of sustainability takes its point of departure from what we take to be the indivisibility of these four dimensions of architecture — the social, the environmental, the economic and the political — each of which are metonyms for the totality of relations within which it is produced and consumed. These are not component parts of a whole which they compose — which is how they are treated within a capitalist economy; rather, they constitute different perspectives on that totality. Language by its nature abstracts this totality into discrete objects of knowledge, and we can separate one dimension of architecture discursively to talk about its specificity. But no matter how much we try to separate these spheres — to argue, as our politicians and economists do, that the political sphere is outside of our economy and 'there is no alternative' to capitalism; or, as our developers and architects do, that the social and environmental requirements of a housing development are discharged with a portion of its budget — in our social practice, in our economic models, in our political policies, and in the environmental consequences these will have for us, they are indivisible. A socialist architecture, therefore, must seek to understand each dimension of its practice within the totality of relations. To talk of a sustainable city, a sustainable economy, a sustainable environment — or, indeed, a sustainable politics — we must address each of these contexts in their relationship to each other.

Opposed Cycles of Development

There are numerous reports from the building industry on how architects can address climate change through the technical requirements of new buildings, but this doesn't address the larger questions of why we build and for whom. Through financial donations to political parties and planning authorities, the building industry has a very powerful political voice in setting policy. And the while the motivations behind development are numerous, within a capitalist economy the motivations for architecture are primarily financial, not social or environmental.



Architects for Social Housing, Alternative economies of housing provision

The cycle of capitalist production is based on extraction: of materials from the natural world at one end of the cycle, and of profit from labour at the other. In this cycle, the value of the architectural product is its exchange value, which is established at the moment of its consumption on the property market. In contrast, a socialist and sustainable economy is based on refurbishment, improvement, maintenance and reuse, rather than consumption, thereby reducing extraction of natural resources and minimising waste from production. In this circular economy, the value of the architectural product is its use value, which is first and foremost as housing. If we are going to achieve anything like a sustainable architecture, we must begin by challenging the fundamental assumptions and principles on which the practices of the building industry are based.

It is our current economic structure, which is that of monopoly capitalism, that is at the root of unsustainable development. In order to create any kind of really sustainable development, we need to challenge the economic and political structures in and around the development process, the processes involved in the production of architecture, and the social and economic relations embedded within each and every project and practice. Our latest publication, *For a Socialist Architecture*, attempts to articulate what the principles and practices of a sustainable socialist architecture might be.

By 'a socialist architecture' we don't mean the architecture of the past: of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, of the Eastern Bloc in Europe, of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, of the People's Republic of China, of the centrally-planned city of Chandigarh in the Republic of India, of the post-colonial Federal Capital of Brasilia in the Fourth Republic of Brazil, of the National Arts Schools in the post-revolutionary Republic of Cuba, or even the post-war architecture of that most absurd of historical anachronisms, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This doesn't mean these historical examples of socialist architecture don't offer us models from which we can learn, but what we want to develop is a socially, environmentally and economically sustainable architecture of the future. This can only be a socialist architecture, the principles of which we need to start practicing in the present if it is ever to be brought into existence in the future.

Contexts for a Socialist Architecture

So, what are the constituent contexts of the built environment, and how must they relate if we are to produce a socially beneficial, environmentally sustainable, economically viable and politically socialist architecture?

- *The Social.* To situate architecture within the totality of the relations of its production, distribution, exchange and consumption, and propose new practices for a socialist architecture under capitalism.
- *The Environmental.* To understand and reduce the totality of consumption within the finitude of global resources.
- *The Economic.* To design for and implement economic de-growth within the context of global housing demand.
- *The Political.* To reclaim the political dimension of architecture and bring about progressive change within the totality of social, environmental and economic relations.

In the UK right now, and across capitalist democracies, the environment has become a framework for thinking about what we want or have to do with the world, and how or if we are going to continue into the future. 'The environment' is another word for what we mean by 'the totality'. At the moment, the primary way in which the architectural profession is responding to its contribution to the continuing rise of carbon emissions around the world is through technical inventions such as 'green' roofs and walls, photovoltaic panels, improved insulation, triple glazing, renewable sources of materials, etc. What it rarely if ever considers is the environmental cost of construction or demolition on the local ecosystem, or the social cost of the tenure types and sale prices of the residential dwellings it is designing, or the economic costs to both residents and the public sector of development, or the political agendas it is serving. In other words, architectural discourse is isolating 'the environment' from the totality of relations in which architecture exists, which includes its social, economic and political dimensions.

The London Clearances

Unlike more architecturally intact European cities such as Paris, London, as a result of both the Second World War and twentieth-century planning policies such as slum clearance, has historically been a socially integrated city, with different classes living in relative proximity to each other rather than segregated into discreet neighbourhoods. However, over the last decade in particular, as a result of the financialisation of residential property by international capital looking for a safe investment, the land on which working-class communities are housed — and primarily in inner-city council estates of public housing — has become more and more valuable.

The vast profits made from the sale of this land by public authorities and its redevelopment by private developers for capital investment is not being captured and reinvested, either in the use of the land or in the needs of the local community. Instead, these profits are being extracted from the cycle of production by an economic system designed to accumulate capital into fewer and fewer hands, thereby producing greater and greater inequality. Like agricultural land stripped of nutrients by over-farming, developers are stripping our cities, reducing them to investment opportunities to be profited from and exhausted purely for their capital yield, rather than cultivated as social and cultural spaces for living.

In order to extract and capture this rising financial value of land, all other values must be denied. The marketisation of housing subordinates the use-value of land to its exchange-value, stripping it of all other qualities that accompany that use, such as its fulfillment of a social need, its contribution to the environment or the economic sustainability of its housing.

To enact this appropriation, the land must first be stripped of residents. This is typically preceded by removing any amenities for communal use or public good, followed by the demolition of the housing, its redevelopment and privatisation. Residents evicted from their homes are, as a rule, unable to afford the increased rental or mortgage costs to move back into the new development, and as a consequence are forced to leave their communities and support networks. In London, where this practice of neo-liberal urban development is destroying the social fabric of the inner city, we call it 'social cleansing'.

Through this vast transfer of public land and wealth into private hands, this process, which is facilitated in the UK by the so-called estate 'regeneration' programme, privatises publicly-owned assets and further reduces public access to parts of the city, including amenities such as parks, open spaces and community facilities. This privatisation is a direct cause of spatial, economic and environmental inequality, and is unsustainable for the healthy development of our cities. We can see this highlighted in the current coronavirus crisis in which existing housing inequalities have been exacerbated through unequal access to outdoor space and overcrowded accommodation contributing to huge differences in people's ability to function during the Government-imposed 'lockdown'.

In addition, in order to facilitate this privatisation, the demolition of perfectly good buildings, infrastructure, public amenities and assets such as housing is deeply unsustainable environmentally. This is not only because of the huge amount of embodied carbon locked into the existing concrete or masonry structures, but also because of the bi-products of demolition such as dust and other pollutants. Add to that the enormous volume of waste material, most of which goes direct to landfill, and we begin to arrive at an estimation of the environmental costs of demolition, to which we still have to add the carbon cost of replacing what is demolished.

Neoliberal housing policy in the UK is based on three basic principles that are the entrenched in the housing policies of all our parliamentary political parties. These are:

1. That attracting investment in UK residential property from the private sector, including foreign investors, overseas buyers and offshore financial jurisdictions, should be the primary source of revenue for house building, rather than state investment.
2. That according to the law of supply and demand, massively increasing the number of residential properties for market sale will reduce house prices in general;
3. That the sale of prime and super-prime residential properties for the highest possible market price will cross-subsidise the provision of so-called 'affordable housing' the rest of the population can afford to rent or buy.

All three principles, however, rest on fallacies about how the UK property market works in practice:

1. Because private investment in the property market has qualitatively transformed housing into a global commodity, to which traditional notions of property ownership no longer apply; with anonymous investors represented by companies registered in offshore financial jurisdictions using mortgages on property to leverage additional finance, or speculating on shares in the value uplift consequent upon planning permission for residential property being granted on a piece of land they will never see and which may never even be developed;
2. Because the law of supply and demand doesn't describe this property market, whose financialisation by global capital has driven prices up — at it is intended to — not down;
3. Because far from cross-subsidising affordable housing, let alone homes for social rent, private investment is instead funding the demolition of public housing and the sale of public land for the development of primarily market-sale properties.

The term 'induced demand' was originally used in the 1970s to describe the increase in traffic consequent upon the construction of more roads in US cities. Applied to the concept of UK housing decades later, it describes what we have seen when more residential property is built in cities, which is the increase in the prices at which it rents and sells. The housing market cannot be described with the traditional economic model of supply and demand, according to which the greater the supply of a product the lower the demand for it and therefore the price at which that product is traded. Always more than just a use-value, housing nevertheless has now become a global

investment commodity, and any policy for increasing its affordability based on the so-called 'law' of supply and demand is bound to fail.

The Costs of Neoliberal Housing Policy

The social and financial costs of this policy have been huge.

- Between 2006 and 2014, at least £170 billion worth of UK property was acquired by companies registered to offshore financial jurisdictions.²
- The real owners of more than half of the 44,000 UK land titles registered to overseas companies are unidentified, but 9 out of 10 of the properties were purchased through tax havens.³
- In the second half of 2018, overseas investors purchased 57 per cent of all homes in Central London.⁴
- As of October 2019, £10.7 billion-worth of residential property in London is sitting empty.⁵
- Only a quarter of the residential properties with planning permission in London between 2017 and 2021 will meet current housing price and tenure demand.⁶
- Of the 169,770 residential properties completed in England between April 2018 and March 2019, only 6,287 homes, or 3.7 per cent of the total, were for social rent.⁷
- The total number of unsold new-build properties in London on sale for more than £1 million has hit a record high of 3,000 units, with half of all new-build residential properties in Central London currently standing empty.⁸

Unsurprisingly, the imposition of these policies has had considerable impact on the accumulation of capital in the UK property market

- The total value of the UK housing stock in 2018 was £7.29 trillion, having risen by a third over the last decade alone. This is equivalent to 3.45 times the gross domestic product of the UK, and more than 62 per cent of the UK's entire net wealth of £11.63 trillion.⁹
- 72 per cent of the increase in the value of UK housing stock in 2018, some £137.7 billion, was due to house prices going up, with only 28 per cent of that increase coming from new properties being built. Property wealth, in other words, is not coming from an increase in housing production but from an inflation in house prices caused by market speculation and government subsidies such as Help to Buy equity loans.
- In 2016, the 10 largest house builders in the UK were sitting on land with planning permission sufficient to build 404,000 new residential properties, as well as holding option agreements with landowners on enough land to build another 480,000. Yet between them they built less than 30,000 new dwellings that year.¹⁰
- Despite this — or rather because of it — the pre-tax profits of the four largest UK builders rose from just under £419 million in 2011 to over £2.6 billion in 2016. That's a more than six-fold increase in just five years. The largest builder, Persimmon, cleared £1 billion profit in 2018.¹¹ There is a direct

2. See 'Selling England (and Wales) by the pound'. Private Eye. <https://www.private-eye.co.uk/registry>

3. See 'Foreign Ownership of London Property Shrouded in Secrecy'. Thomson Reuters. 5 December, 2016. <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/press-releases/2016/december/foreign-ownership-of-london-property-shrouded-in-secrecy.html>

4. See West, Laura. 'Overseas investors take advantage of weak pound to purchase London property'. Inventory Base. 7 March, 2019. <https://inventorybase.co.uk/blog/overseas-investors-take-advantage-of-weak-pound-to-purchase-london-property/>

5. See Peat, Jack. 'Almost £11 billion-worth of London housing is sitting empty'. The London Economic. 30 October, 2019.

<https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/property/almost-11-billion-worth-of-london-housing-is-sitting-empty/30/10/?fbclid=IwAR3pDsOBn3Wae9lwgmJrTz7kFrMxkSHbg6vZWvCuIIOPy99SYcdn8PESYgs>

6. See Warrick, Katy. 'London needs more affordably priced homes'. Savills. 5 April, 2017.

https://www.savills.co.uk/research_articles/229130/216234-0

7. See Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'House building; new build dwellings, England: March quarter 2019', *Office of National Statistics* (4 July 2019)

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814487/House_Building_Release_March_2019.pdf; and Champ, Hamish. 'Social housing numbers fall', Building. https://www.building.co.uk/news/social-housing-numbers-fall/5102839.article?fbclid=IwAR0iJ6Xqe84OuOZXFWQ-TdzLOdhb5200HZ49-TeTcPHBmYSRPDBR_t0-1So#.XdVxDS0UyJM.facebook

8. See Neate, Rupert. 'Ghost towers: Half of new-build luxury London flats fail to sell'. The Guardian. 26 January, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/jan/26/ghost-towers-half-of-new-build-luxury-london-flats-fail-to-sell>

9. See 'Total value of UK's housing stock reached £7.29 trillion in 2018, report finds'. Business Matters. 14 January, 2019.

<https://www.bmmagazine.co.uk/news/total-value-of-uks-housing-stock-reached-7-29-trillion-in-2018-report-finds/>

10. See Jefferys, Pete. 'Land banking: What's the story?'. Shelter. 14 December, 2016. <https://blog.shelter.org.uk/2016/12/land-banking-whats-the-story-part-1/>

11. See Neat, Rupert. 'Outrage as help-to-buy boosts Persimmon profits to £1bn'. The Guardian. 26 February, 2019.

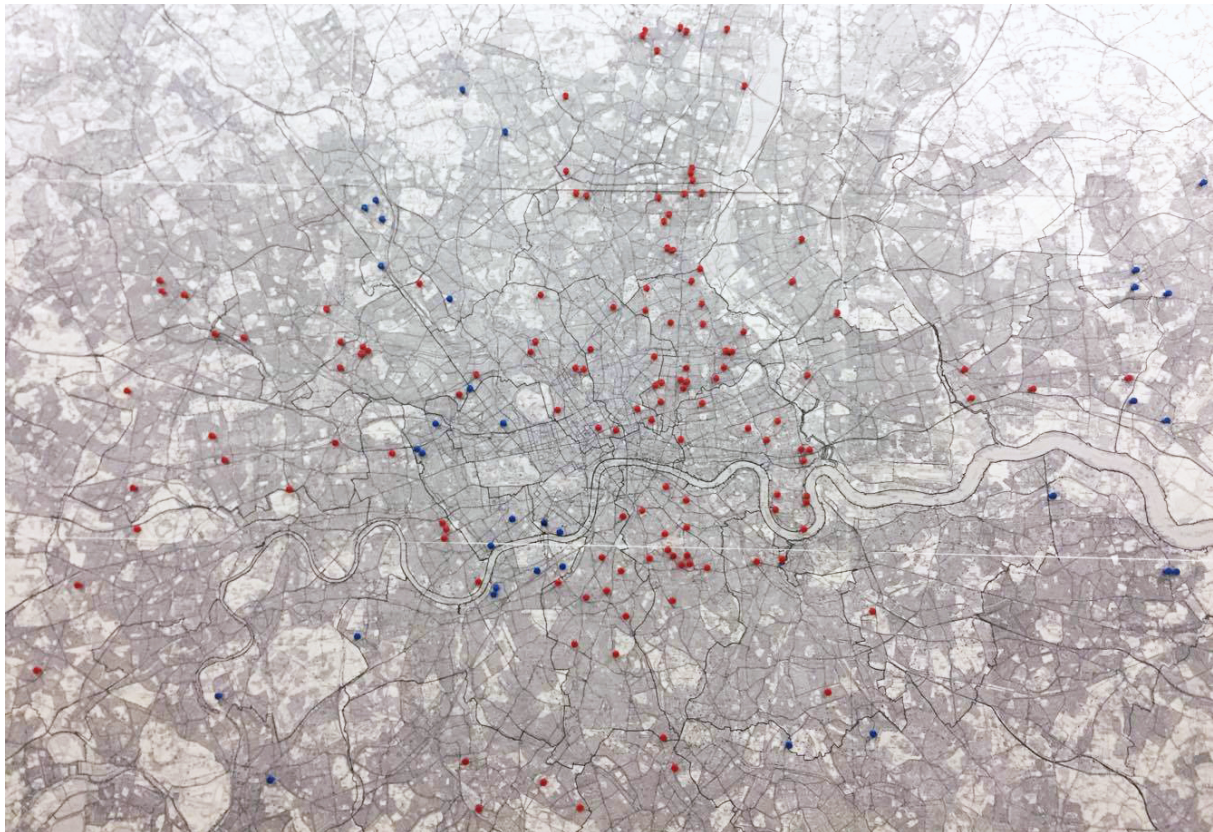
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/feb/26/persimmon-profits-help-to-buy-scheme>

correlation, therefore, between housing supply and the profits being made from it, but it is not based on flooding the market with low-cost housing.

Mapping London's Estate Regeneration Programme

In August 2017, as part of a residency at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, ASH produced this map (*below*) locating every London council or social housing estate that had recently undergone, was currently undergoing, or was threatened with partial or full demolition, privatisation (either through a stock transfer to a housing association or through redevelopment), or social cleansing (of decanted and evicted residents unable to afford to return to the new properties) with the resulting loss of homes for social rent.¹² Red pins indicated estates in London's 21 Labour-run boroughs, of which by the time of the exhibition we had located 196; blue pins in the 10 Conservative-run boroughs, which had 37 estates; and yellow pins in the single Liberal Democrat-run borough of Sutton, which had submitted 5 estates for viability assessments with public money from the Estate Regeneration National Strategy. In total, we identified 237 London housing estates.

According to a report published by the Chartered Institute of Housing in February, 2019, in the six years between 2012 and 2018 more than 165,000 homes for social rent have been lost to demolition, right to buy, or conversion to affordable rent in England.¹³ Bad as this figure is, however, it is far short of the actual number, as homes for social rent lost to estate regeneration schemes are only counted and reported by the local authorities implementing them on completion of the redevelopment, which is often decades later.



Architects for Social Housing, Map of London's estate regeneration programme (detail)

The Costs of Estate Demolition

In a typical large estate regeneration scheme in London, such as the Ferrier, Woodberry Down or Aylesbury estates, the density of residential property in the new development is increased by around 200-300 per cent.

12. See Elmer, Simon and Denning, Geraldine. 'Mapping London' Estate Regeneration Programme'. Architects for Social Housing. 10 September, 2017. <https://architectsfor-socialhousing.co.uk/2017/09/10/mapping-londons-estate-regeneration-programme/>

13. See 'More than 165,000 homes for social rent lost in just six years, new analysis reveals'. Chartered Institute for Housing. 6 February, 2019. http://www.cih.org/news-article/display/vpathDCR/templatedata/cih/news-article/data/More_than_165000_homes_for_social_rent_lost_in_just_six_years_new_analysis_reveals

However, around 70 per cent of the demolished estate is usually council or social rent, with the remaining 30 per cent low-cost leaseholder homes purchased under the right-to-buy. The new development is at least 50 per cent, and typically far more, properties for market sale, with the remainder a mix of shared ownership, shared equity and rent-to-buy schemes, market-rent properties, and a minimum of so-called 'affordable' rent housing which, at up to 80 per cent of market rent, is anything but affordable for most Londoners. Homes for social rent, the most in demand tenure type, have been phased out and few, if any, are being built. The result of this is that London and other UK cities copying the estate regeneration programme are becoming increasingly impossible to live in for the working class, who either have to endure longer commutes to work, more expensive and overcrowded living conditions, or in many cases forced to move out of London entirely.

The Heygate estate, for example, which is in Zone 1 of London's transport system, was completed in 1974 and subsequently demolished between 2011 and 2014. The original 1,214 homes were replaced with 2,535 new properties. However, only 82 will be for social rent. Three quarter will be for market sale, and the rest various forms of affordable housing, the majority for shared ownership. In 2017, Transparency International stated that 100 per cent of South Gardens, the first block of the new developments, had been sold to overseas buyers. Just 45 of the estate's 1,034 council-tenanted households moved back into the new homes they were promised. The remainder of the residents were relocated miles away from their former home, and in many cases out of the city altogether, as they were unable to afford the increased housing costs of the new development.

ASH Manifesto

It was within this context that Architects for Social Housing (ASH) was founded in March 2015 by Geraldine Denning and Simon Elmer. Offering an architectural response to London's crisis of housing affordability, ASH is a Community Interest Company that organises working collectives of architects, urban designers, engineers, surveyors, planners, film-makers, photographers, artists, writers and housing campaigners for individual projects. Tailored to meet specific needs, these collectives operate with developing ideas under set principles.

First among these is the conviction that increasing the housing capacity on existing council estates, rather than redeveloping them as properties for capital investment, is a more sustainable solution to London's housing needs than the demolition of the city's social housing during a housing shortage, enabling, as it does, the continued existence of the communities they house.

ASH offers support, advice and expertise to residents who feel their interests and voices are being ignored by local councils or housing associations during the so-called 'regeneration' process. ASH's primary responsibility is to existing residents — tenants and leaseholders alike; but ASH is also committed to finding socially beneficial, economically viable and environmentally sustainable alternatives to estate demolition that are in the interests of the wider London community.

ASH operates on three levels of activity: architecture, community and propaganda:

1. *We propose* architectural alternatives to estate demolition schemes through designs for infill, roof extensions and refurbishment that increase housing capacity on the estates by around 50 per cent and, by renting a proportion of the new homes on the private market, generate the funds to refurbish the existing council homes, while leaving the communities they currently house intact.
2. *We support* estate communities in their resistance to the demolition of their homes by working with residents over a period of time, providing them with information about estate regeneration and housing policy from a reservoir of knowledge and tactics pooled from similar campaigns across London.
3. *We share* information that aims to correct unfounded statements and counter negative perceptions about social housing in the minds of the public, and raise awareness of the role of relevant interest groups — including political parties, local authorities, housing associations, property developers, real estate firms and architectural practices — in the regeneration process. Using a variety of means, including publications, presentations, reports, case studies, exhibitions, films and protests, we are trying to initiate change in both practice and policy within UK housing.

Over the past five years ASH has worked with residents on 7 council and social housing estate demolition projects and supported and advised dozens of other campaigns organised by residents threatened with the demolition of their homes. These redevelopment projects are typically carried out by local authorities or housing associations, whose demolition of these housing estates is resulting in the overwhelming loss of tens of thousands of council and socially rented homes, exacerbating the housing crisis in the UK.

The design alternatives to demolition that ASH has produced demonstrate that we can increase the density of the existing housing estates by around 50 per cent without the need for demolition; that the funds generated from the market sale or rent of a proportion of the new homes can fund both the construction of the new homes and the refurbishment of the existing homes, and well as improvements to the estate's landscape and community facilities. In short, not only is demolition and redevelopment environmentally ruinous, socially catastrophic for the existing residents and financially risky for the council, but it is not economically necessary in order to increase housing capacity and refurbish the existing homes on the estate.

Central Hill: A Case Study in Estate Regeneration

Built between 1966 and 1974, the Central Hill estate contains 476 dwellings that are home to approximately 1,200 residents. In 2016 the estate was condemned to demolition by Lambeth council and is awaiting redevelopment by Homes for Lambeth, a council-owned commercial venture financed by private investment partners. This so-called 'regeneration' scheme will result in the permanent loss of 340 secure council tenancy homes for social rent in a borough with 28,000 people on the housing waiting list.

Central Hill estate is built on a steep hill in South London, and has striking views across Central London and the Thames Valley. Indeed, it is these views that will justify the half-a-million pound plus price tags of the market-sale properties the council wants to build on the estate's ruins. It is a measure of the socialist principles of the existing design that every flat and maisonette has equal access to these views, as well as generous south-facing balconies or courtyard gardens, neither of which will pertain in the new development.

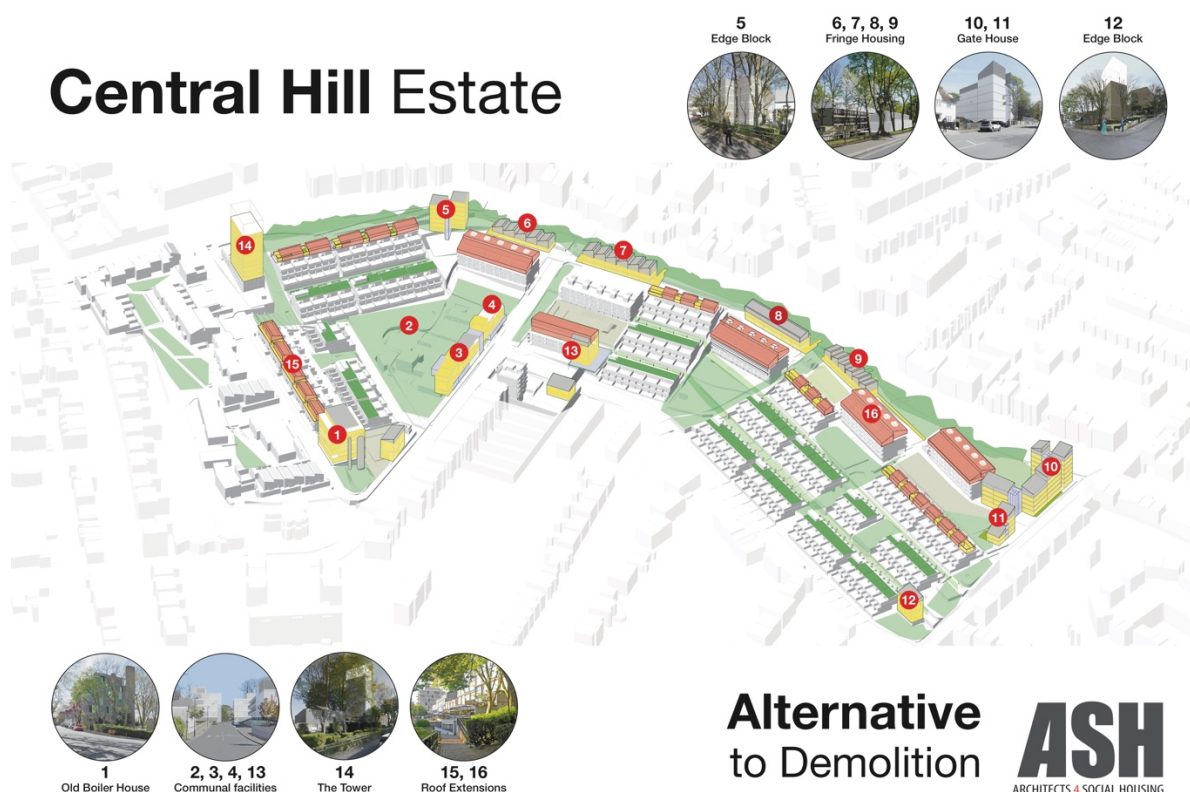
One of the principles of a sustainable socialist architecture formulated by ASH is that the architectural 'object' cannot be separated from those that produce and use it. The process by which architecture is commissioned, designed, constructed and managed is fundamental to its production. On all of ASH's projects, the residents are the 'client', not the landlord; and it is the needs of the residents and local community that ASH is designing for, not for the profit of investors and developers. It is with the residents, therefore, that ASH worked to oppose the demolition of the Central Hill estate, by demonstrating there are architectural alternatives to demolition that are socially beneficial, environmentally sustainable and economically viable.

The project and campaign, however, were not solely a question of designing an alternative to demolition; but also meant challenging and correcting propagated narratives and stigma around social housing. The widespread and concerted promotion of negative stereotypes about council housing by government, municipal authorities, local councils, the media, property developers, community consultants and architectural practices facilitate the demolition of the housing estates. If the residents themselves don't value their homes, and are brought up instead to believe their housing is poorly designed, substandard in build, not worth refurbishing and no longer fit for purpose, then there is no collective will to defend it against demolition. Importantly, the 'social engineering' associated with the aspirations of modernist architecture has been retrospectively applied as evidence that these housing estates — and by implication the modernist project as a whole — has failed. Apparent evidence of anti-social behavior, crime, poverty and drug taking — which are no worse on council estates than anywhere else in London, and typically less prominent among estates communities — are all produced and attributed to a closed relationship between residents and architecture. By isolating architecture from its social, economic and political contexts, the agents of neo-liberal urban development are able to point their fingers at the modernist architecture of these housing estates as the guilty party.¹⁴ Combined with the managed decline of the estate — through which funding for maintenance is withdrawn, allowing the homes to fall into disrepair — such modernist estates are rendered worthy of demolition in the eyes of the general public.

ASH's design alternative to the demolition of Central Hill Estate proposed the refurbishment of all 476 dwellings, including improving the thermal performance of the properties, and minimising the cold-bridging that is a common but not irremedial failure of post-war housing estates. This included external insulation, green roofs, the overhaul of ventilation and services, and new doors and windows throughout. We also proposed reinstating the pedestrian walkways that were a key aspect of the original scheme — ingeniously integrating the estate into the steep landscape of the hillside — thereby retaining and increasing the biodiversity of the green corridor; and reusing and repurposing existing unused buildings on the estate.

14. See Elmer, Simon. 'Rioting, Legislation and Estate Demolition: A Chronology of Social Cleansing in London, 1999-2019'. Architects for Social Housing. 16 October, 2019. <https://architectsforsocialhousing.co.uk/2019/10/16/rioting-legislation-and-estate-demolition-a-chronology-of-social-cleansing-in-london-1999-2019/>

Finally, in collaboration with residents, we were able to find room on the estate for an additional 242 new dwellings. These were a mix of infill housing and roof extensions to the existing low-rise blocks. These included the construction of a new mid-rise tower on the disused communal heating block, with the refurbishment of the partially submerged ground floors of the existing structure as workshops and the retention of the chimneys as a gateway to the estate. We also added 1-2 floors of additional housing to the low-rise blocks in a way that would both respect the existing architecture and ensure there are no significant effects on the right-to-light of the existing homes. And we also proposed the construction of a new ‘fringe’ of housing along the main road, improving access into the estate and creating a new relationship with the existing street pattern. Crucially, without the huge costs of demolishing and rebuilding the existing 476 homes, our viability assessment was able to propose at least half of the new buildings for social rent, with the sale or rent of the remaining new housing to pay for the development and refurbishment.¹⁵



Architects for Social Housing, Design alternative to demolition of Central Hill estate

The cross-subsidisation of social housing by market-sale and rent property is an unfortunate consequence of our current political and economic climate, not an ambition or a principle. Unfortunately, without sufficient government funding it is the only way such a project is financially viable. However, our financial report on *The Costs of Estate Regeneration* has shown that this lack of government funding in no respect justifies the demolition of council housing estates, which is many times more expensive than their refurbishment and infill.¹⁶

Alternative sources of funding, such as philanthropic benefactors and charities, have been a part of the history of social housing, from industrialists such as Joseph Rowntree and George Peabody; but this is largely non-existent today, and certainly in not in sufficient supply to meet housing need. In the current absence of government funding for social housing, innovative initiatives such as community shares, or more conventional funders such as pension schemes, are all possible solutions and deserve further research. Co-operative housing, community-led housing, and community land trusts are all mechanisms that are more widely used in the USA and the rest of Europe than in the UK, but they offer potentially affordable alternatives to cross-subsidisation by market sales, which is failing to meet housing need. Such alternatives have the benefit of offering residents

15. See Architects for Social Housing. Central Hill: A Case Study in Estate Regeneration. April 2018.

<https://architectsforsocialhousing.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Central-Hill.pdf>

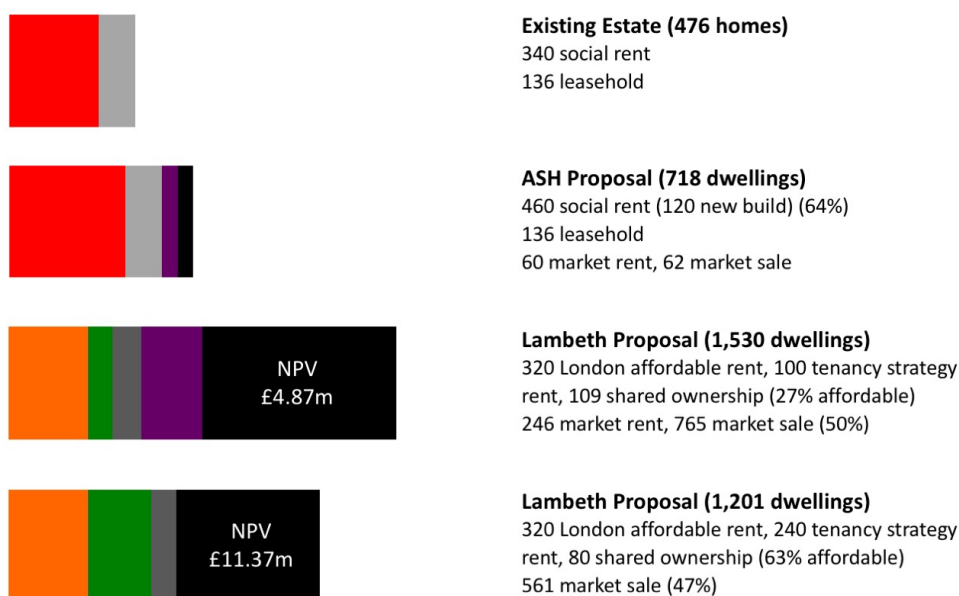
16. See Architects for Social Housing. The Costs of Estate Regeneration: A Report by Architects for Social Housing. September 2018.

<https://architectsforsocialhousing.co.uk/2018/09/07/the-costs-of-estate-regeneration/>

greater control over their housing; however, not being public housing, CLT developers have no obligation to house low-income renters; and without significant support in terms of funding and resources such initiatives will not address the scale of the most needed form of housing tenure in the UK — that of social-rented housing owned, managed and maintained by the local authority.

One of the criticisms levelled at post-war modernist estates by architects employed to justify demolishing them is that they are closed formal systems isolated from the surrounding neighbourhoods, and do not accommodate the kind of diversity of spaces that support an open, thriving and successful living environment. While this criticism doesn't describe the possible variations within the modernist plan exemplified by Central Hill estate, through sensitive architectural intervention it is possible to improve these estates with the addition of new housing and community facilities. This means working closely with residents who understand the needs of the estate and its inhabitants, rather than championing or denigrating this or that architectural style.

Cities are not bland homogenous places, but the site of cumulative memory and collective history, and must be able to adapt and change. The robust nature of much of the architecture of the 1960s and 1970s, in comparison to that built today, means that all of the estates with whose residents ASH has worked have been able to accommodate extensive alterations and additions. These would allow that part of the city to grow, rather than being subject to the slash and burn tactics of which many of these estates were the product and which have been revived today to clear the inner cities for global capital investment. Unfortunately, the history of social housing in the UK has been the history of social cleansing. The Boundary Estate in East London, built in one of the first social housing schemes in the UK, opened in 1900 on the land cleared of the Old Nichol slum. However, only 11 of the original 6,000 residents were wealthy enough to be able to afford to move back into the new estate, whose rents were deliberately set to encourage skilled labourers from the local garment trade.



Architects for Social Housing, Comparative tenure breakdown of Central Hill estate

ASH's proposal for the refurbishment and infill of Central Hill estate was costed by an independent quantity surveyor, Robert Martell and Partners, who priced the scheme at approximately £97 million. Our own viability assessment based on council figures leaked to us by the residents established that, of the 242 new-build homes we proposed, 120 could be let for social rent, with the rest split 50/50 between market sale and rent, paid back over 25 years. This is in contrast to the council's own proposal, which contained no homes for social rent, the 460 demolished replaced by 320 properties for London affordable rent (60 per cent higher than social rent), 100 for target rent (double social rent), 109 shared-ownership properties, and the remaining 1,000 properties, 65 per cent of the total, a mix of market sale and rent, with the former comprising at least 50 per cent of the entire development.

The Environmental Costs of Demolition

In June 2019, the UK Parliament passed an amendment to The Climate Change Act 2008 requiring the Government to reduce the UK's net emissions of greenhouse gases by 100 per cent relative to 1990 levels by 2050.¹⁷ If we are to begin to achieve anything approaching this reduction in carbon emissions within the building industry over the next 30 years, we have to stop demolishing the high-carbon, concrete-framed buildings we have already built. In 2016 ASH commissioned the environmental engineering firm, Model Environments, to produce a report on the environmental consequences of demolishing Central Hill estate.¹⁸ This began with the following observations:

- 'The concrete industry is one of the world's two largest producers of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide. About half of the emissions come directly from the heating of limestone in its manufacture, and around 40% are emissions associated with burning fuel.
- 'A significant fraction of the carbon emissions a building will make over its lifetime is locked into the fabric by the time the building is constructed. As improvements in efficiency reduce carbon emissions from energy in the operational phase, increasing attention is being given to the issue of embodied carbon, examination of which can provide cost-effective carbon savings.
- 'When a building is demolished, there are carbon emissions from the energy used in the deconstruction, removal and disposal of the waste. There may also be CO² emissions released by chemical processes as the building fabric is broken up.'

From these, the report went on to estimate the carbon cost of demolishing Central Hill estate:

- 'A conservative estimate for the embodied carbon of Central Hill estate would be around 7000 tonnes of CO²e. Those are similar emissions to those from heating 600 detached homes for a year using electric heating, or the emissions savings made by the London Mayor's retrofitting scheme in a year and a quarter.
- 'For the demolition phase a conservative estimate of 3 months (480 hours) with 4 excavators using 30 litres of diesel per hour equals 57,600 litres. A conversion factor of 2.68kg of CO²e per litre of diesel suggests a figure of approximately 154 tonnes of CO².
- 'Annual domestic emissions per capita in Lambeth were 1.8 tonnes in 2012. Therefore, the emissions associated with the demolition of Central Hill estate equate to the annual emissions of over 4,000 Lambeth residents.
- 'Other environmental impacts from the demolition such as air pollution and water pollution should also be considered in further studies.'

As Chris Jofeh, the building retrofit leader of Arups, the engineering company that built Central Hill estate, has stated: 'Even if you build a super-efficient home, it could take 30 years before you redress the balance.'¹⁹ Green roofs and walls, photo-voltaic panels, external insulation, improved thermal performance and the reduced energy consumption of modern new-builds are not enough to offset the environmental impact of demolition and redevelopment. The environmental sustainability of new-build housing needs to be assessed as part of the totality of its production, and one of the crucial conclusions we were able to draw from our research and design work on Central Hill estate was that demolition is socially, economically and environmentally unsustainable.

In its place, therefore, we need to further explore and start promoting and enacting the benefits of refurbishment. In summary, refurbishment:

- Enables the continuation of communities otherwise displaced by demolition, as well as the maintenance of existing eco-systems that would be largely destroyed by redevelopment;
- Improves the internal environment and residents' living conditions, health and well-being;
- Reduces energy use, and therefore financial costs and fuel poverty, as well as the environmental costs of production;
- Retains the embodied carbon in existing buildings;

17. See The Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2019/1056/contents/made>

18. See Model Environments. 'Embodied Carbon Estimation for Central Hill Estate'. 16 December, 2016.

<https://architectsforsocialhousing.co.uk/2017/02/02/embodied-carbon-estimation-for-central-hill-estate-report-by-model-environments/>

19. London Assembly Housing Committee. 'Knock it Down or Do it Up? The challenge of estate regeneration'. February 2015.

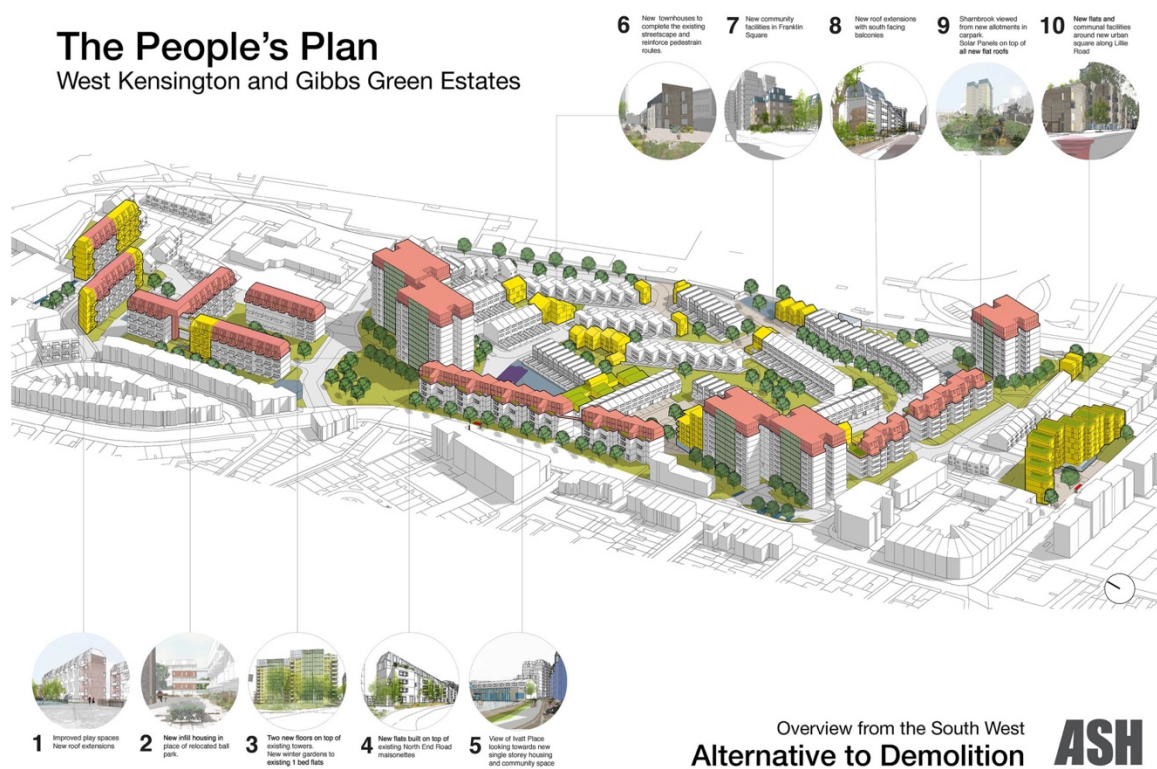
https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/gla_migrate_files_destination/KnockItDownOrDoltUp_0.pdf

Following around six months' of engagement, two walks and six design workshops with over 200 residents, ASH identified the possibility for 327 new homes on the estate without demolition. We also located opportunities for improvements to both the landscape and community facilities, while also increasing its existing housing density by around 45 per cent.

These design proposals included roof extensions (*coloured in pink below*) and infill housing (*in yellow*), plus the refurbishment of all 760 dwellings with external insulation, green roofs, overhaul of ventilation and services, new doors and windows resulting in lower energy costs, reduced fuel poverty and elimination of cold bridging, new lifts, balconies and winter gardens added to existing towers. The construction of a small number of single person infill dwellings would enable often elderly residents in under-occupied homes to move to a new smaller home on the estate (possibly supported accommodation), which would in turn free up these larger homes for currently overcrowded families. Works to the community facilities included a new community hall and children's play spaces, community allotments, tree-planting initiatives and sustainable urban drainage, and re-purposing existing unused garages as workshops or not-for-profit workspaces to support small resident-run businesses.

As with Central Hill estate, ASH's designs were priced by a quantity surveyor, and the viability assessment established, once again, that the market sale or rent of a proportion of the new homes would enable the construction of all the new residencies, the improvement works to the landscape and community facilities, and the refurbishment of the existing homes.

In November of 2019, it was announced that, following six years of campaigning, Hammersmith and Fulham council had bought back West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates from the developer CAPCO, saving the homes from demolition. The residents are now fighting for community ownership, and are working with the Mayor's office on proposals for developing part of the site, with ASH's proposals forming an integral part of the residents' vision for the future of their estate.



Architects for Social Housing, Design alternative to demolition of West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates

Patmore Co-operative: Whose Opportunity?

The Patmore Co-operative housing estate is located in the Vauxhall, Nine Elms, Battersea Opportunity Area, close to Battersea Power station in South-west London. This is one of the largest building developments in Europe at the moment, located on some of the most expensive land in the world. The estate was built in the 1950s on a

WWII bomb-site, targeted because it was previously the site of a munitions factory and a large railway terminal. The estate originally housed the local working-class population, many of whom served the local factories and power station.

Managed co-operatively since 1994, the 854 homes on the estate are not currently under immediate threat of demolition; but given their proximity to the new American Embassy and VNEB Opportunity Area, the residents have every right to be concerned about their future. In addition to these fears, residents understood that improvements to their estate were needed, and in 2017 the co-operative asked ASH to look at improvements to the homes, landscape and community facilities on the estate, with the aim of convincing their landlord, Wandsworth council, of the benefits of funding necessary works to the estate. Ongoing maintenance is a required aspect of any built environment, and its opposite, 'managed decline', when a landlord deliberately withholds funds necessary to the maintenance of a place, leads to the decline of that environment.

Under the title, 'A Vision for the Future of the Estate', ASH began by asking the question: if this is an opportunity area, should it not also be an opportunity for the current residents, and not only for property investors? To help answer this question, we divided our discussions with the residents and co-op management board into three categories, 'home', 'landscape' and 'community and commerce', with a few preliminary thoughts about the possibility of 'new housing' — although these didn't progress as far as the other areas. Our eventual proposals were for the refurbishment of all 854 dwellings — including external insulation, reduced cold-bridging and improved thermal performance; with an overhaul of ventilation and heating services and fundamental works to bathrooms and kitchens. Combined, this would bring the existing homes up to and beyond the 'Decent Homes Standard' introduced by the UK Government in the 2000s.²¹



In addition to this remedial work, our proposals included works to the bin stores and shared communal areas of the blocks, the reinstatement and reuse of the disused laundry rooms on the ground floor of each block as not-for-profit community-run DIY spaces. These latter could accommodate some of the numerous ideas residents proposed for their use, such as a permanent food bank and community café that could provide both homeless support and a place to learn about healthy cooking; a community hairdresser; an after-school club and social

21. See 'Decent Homes Standard'. Designing Buildings Wiki. https://www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/Decent_Homes_Standard

club; an up-cycling workshop or tool library. These currently unused spaces, so rare in London, could also encourage partnerships between local food-banks, the adjacent Covent Garden food market, and food-growing initiatives on the estate.

The estate being situated in a flood plain means the integration of a low-maintenance, porous, flood-resilient landscape to increase bio-diversity and wildlife is essential. Further proposed works to the landscape included creating a pedestrian and cycle-friendly public realm, and improving play spaces for children, reinforcing what is already an extremely child-friendly estate. New low-energy lighting throughout which, when well designed, can dramatically alter the perception of a place, can play a significant role in the pride residents have in their homes, and improve the internal care of the estate.

Finally, green roofs are a requirement of all new developments within the Opportunity Area, in order to mitigate the consequences of living on a flood plain. Therefore, ASH argued that the retrofitting of the existing flat-roofed buildings with attenuating sedum roofs was environmentally crucial to the area and changing levels of precipitation in the UK, with flash floods an increasingly common occurrence.

The relationship of architect to client — which for a socialist architecture is resident and end-user — is at the heart of the problem of — and solution to — contemporary architecture. The deaths of 72 people in the Grenfell Tower fire in West London in June 2017 is the most terrible example of when the relationship between the client, the architect, the design and construction process and the end-user breaks down.²²

There are many ways for an architect to work with a client in order to obtain a brief and produce a design, and terms like ‘co-production’, ‘co-design’, ‘community engagement’, ‘community consultation’, ‘community (or resident) participation’ all refer to different sets of relationships between the resident or user and the architect and brief creator. An architect typically co-produces a brief with a client, be they an individual homeowner or estate landlord. The client comes with a set of intentions and parameters, and the architect works with these to create a brief, to hone it, perhaps challenge it, consolidate it and, finally, to find material and spatial expression for it. The problem with estate regeneration is not a lack of co-design as such — as evidenced by the huge number of community engagement exercises that take place on any estate regeneration scheme — but that the residents do not have sufficient input into the brief — into what it is that is being designed — and are not adequately informed about the economic and social consequences for them of development proposals.

As with all of ASH’s projects, the residents — in this instance represented by the resident-elected board of the Patmore Co-operative — are the client, and as such they co-produced the brief with ASH’s architects. Co-design is a much more intensive process, and it is extremely difficult to achieve successfully with a community of 2000 residents, or even for that matter 200 or even 20 residents. This is made even more difficult when, as is the case on the Patmore estate, the residents no longer have access to a communal hall in which they can meet in groups larger than about 30. As part of the managed decline of the estate, the council had privatised the community centre — whose construction the co-operative had funded and facilitated over 20 years previously — and which they now cannot access freely. Strategies for engaging with large numbers of residents and listening and responding to their needs are therefore complex and diverse. In comparison, on the West Kensington and Gibbs Green estate there was external funding to pay for a community organiser and a number of ASH architects to design and facilitate a large number of design workshops — as well as a community hall in which to hold them — so there was a far greater element of community participation in the design.

For a Sustainable Socialist Architecture

As a result of our work over the past 5 years, researching into the disastrous effects of the estate regeneration programme and other practices of property development on London’s housing market, and producing design alternatives to the demolition of council and social housing during a global crisis of housing affordability, ASH has formulated some of the principles and practices of what we mean by a ‘socialist architecture’. From these we can conclude the following:

- The built environment cannot be separated from the people who produce and inhabit it.
- The environmental context of a socialist and sustainable architecture means understanding and reducing the totality of consumption within the finitude of global resources.

22. See Architects for Social Housing. The Truth about Grenfell Tower: A Report by Architects for Social Housing. July 2017. <https://architectsforsocialhousing.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Truth-about-Grenfell-Tower.pdf>

- A commitment to reducing carbon emissions and economic de-growth is necessarily a socialist concern, not least because damage to the environment has enormous collective social and economic consequences that are disproportionately born by the poorest members of our societies, of which the fiscal policies of austerity are the most recent example.
- Under capitalism, the global consequences of expansion are not estimated in individual project costs but deferred, manifesting themselves in damage to the health and social well-being of future generations and the irreversible degradation of the global environment.
- While maintaining that only a socialist economy can hope to re-order the relations of production to environmentally and socially sustainable levels of consumption, a socialist and sustainable architecture must seek to offset, resist and challenge the unsustainable growth on which capitalism depends for its profits, and which is the economic cause of the global crisis of housing affordability.

In London, where 80 per cent of the homes and buildings that will be occupied and used in 2050 have already been built, refurbishment is by far the most sustainable means of development. We cannot afford to do anything else, socially, environmentally or economically.

With specific regard to the development processes, which is critical in the production of a socialist architecture, a sustainable urban development must:

- Never displace existing communities;
- Be designed, produced, procured and constructed by or in collaboration with the local community;
- Be not for profit;
- Contribute to improving the environment, health and well-being of existing residents;
- Enact and promote the principles and practices of economic de-growth;
- Meet the housing and communal needs of the poorest members of the population;
- Encourage low impact and healthy living and increase environmental, social and political engagement and awareness.

The question to which socialism has to respond if it is to return as the model of our future is how we balance meeting housing demand against the environmental, economic and perhaps social costs of doing so. As an economic system, socialism is not associated historically with either de-growth or environmentalism — quite the opposite. Historically, after the Second World War, socialist states across the globe had to house hundreds of millions of people very quickly, and in economies that had only recently undergone, or were still undergoing, industrialisation. But the political context in which socialist architecture housed populations made homeless by poverty and colonialism and war in the second half of the Twentieth Century is different from the contemporary context. We will, perhaps, soon be facing as great a crisis in housing provision; but, in addition, we need to meet it under the threat of environmental disaster.

A socialist architecture of the Twenty-first Century will be sustainable or it won't be socialist — not least because, under capitalism, it is the poorest communities that are most effected by contemporary environmental policies and practices. By a sustainable socialist architecture we mean an architecture that engages with the totality of its social, economic, environmental and political contexts to lessen, negate and practice an alternative to the neo-liberal architecture of today. A sustainable socialist architecture must be produced by and for those who do and will inhabit it, not as a commodity for those who want to buy and sell it. A sustainable socialist architecture must meet the housing and civic needs of its citizens. A sustainable socialist architecture must never be produced for profit, always in order to meet these needs. Its value, therefore, is always its use-value as housing or other asset of community value, never it's speculative exchange-value as property.

A sustainable socialist architecture cannot be separated, therefore, from the processes of its production, including its funding, procurement, design, construction, maintenance, use and re-use. These processes, which for a sustainable socialist architecture take precedence over the purely formal and material qualities of the architectural object that are endlessly fetishised in architectural magazines, extend back before and continue beyond the production of a building.

Finally, just as socialism isn't something that is handed down from above by a government, so a sustainable socialist architecture must be produced collectively by everybody: by those who pay for it and those who inhabit it; by those who design it, those who build it and those who use it; by those who argue, lobby and legislate for it; by those who manage it, those who maintain it and those who refurbish it; those who dismantle and those who reconfigure it. We are all the potential agents of a sustainable socialist architecture.